

Who are the workers of the world? Marx and beyond¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I want to focus on the ineluctable question concerning the working class as revolutionary subject. Why has it, until now, hardly lived up to the hopes of Marx and the Marxists? But I can discuss only one aspect of it, namely: what is the working class? What might a critique of the political economy of labour look like that critically reviews the experiences of the past five hundred years while moving beyond the Eurocentrism that continues to dominate Marxism?

KEYWORDS

Marx, Working class as revolutionary subject, Eurocentrism, Marxism

¹ I am plundering here earlier publications, some of which I wrote together with my friend Karl Heinz Roth, the discussions with whom have taught me so much. See especially the editorial introduction and conclusion in van der Linden and Roth, K.H. (eds), *Über Marx hinaus*. Berlin: Assoziation A, 2009, and chapters 2-4 in my *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2010.

Marx: his strengths and weaknesses

We urgently require a critical theory that allows us to analyse the development of the capitalist world-system and work out prospects for a comprehensive reordering of society. Such a theory should allow us to indicate the transcontinental possibilities for action open to a new anticapitalist International, while defining history as an open process. Marxian theory provides important elements for such a reorientation. But it is not sufficient, as it leaves open, or fails to comprehensively address, too many questions. This is already true of the longevity of the capitalist system. Karl Marx thought that he would live to see the transition to a socialist order. For example, he drafted the *Grundrisse* because he expected the 1857–8 economic crisis to mark the beginning of the great transformation. In late 1857, he wrote to Engels: “I am working like mad all night and every night collating my economic studies so that I at least get the outlines clear before the *deluge*”.² The fact that capitalism has proven more resilient than its enemies thought and hoped has often induced Marxists to resort to the most varied intellectual constructs. One need think only of Fritz Sternberg’s theory of the “reprieve”, by which he hoped to explain capitalism’s recovery from the depression of the 1880s and 1890s, or of the theory of the “rising surplus”, developed by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy to account for the boom of the 1950s and 1960s.³ The “socialist” experiments in the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China and elsewhere are also difficult to understand from a Marxian perspective: these social formations were characterised by structural exploitation, but they lacked consolidated ruling classes. In other words, they did not constitute a real alternative to capitalism, and they could, in many cases, be toppled relatively quickly.⁴ This is of course related to the ineluctable question concerning the working class as revolutionary subject. Why has it, until now, hardly lived up to the hopes of Marx and the Marxists?

Here, I want to focus on this last question, but I can discuss only one aspect of it, namely: what is the working class? *What might a critique of the political economy of labour look like that critically reviews the experiences of the past five hundred years while moving beyond the Eurocentrism that continues to dominate Marxism?*

² Marx, Karl. ‘Letter to Friedrich Engels, 8 December 1857’. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*, vol. 40. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983, p. 217.

³ Sternberg, Fritz. *Der Imperialismus*. Berlin: Malik, 1926; Baran, Paul A. and Sweezy, Paul M. *Monopoly Capital. An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966.

⁴ The extensive debates on this question have been reconstructed in Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union. A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010).

To begin with, we need to note that Marx neglected studying the working class in favour of studying capital. Marx conceived of *Capital* as the first part of a six-part work; the “Book on Wage-Labour” was to be another such part, but it was never written. To be sure, there are some rough indications of what Marx would have said in this book.⁵ Nevertheless, much remains entirely unclear. The well-known British social historian Edward P. Thompson rightly observed that *Capital* discusses the logic of capital, but not capitalism; it neglects the social and political dimensions of history, the anger and outrage that become apparent in class struggle. This anger and outrage must remain incomprehensible for as long as one considers only the closed system of economic logic. The “human experience” is neglected, even though it expresses something essential:

Men and women also return as subjects, within this term – not as autonomous subjects, ‘free individuals’, but as persons experiencing their determinate productive situations and relationships, as needs and interests, and as antagonisms, and then ‘handling’ this experience with their consciousness and their culture ... in the most complex ... ways, and then (often but not always through the ensuing structures of class) acting upon their determinate situation in their turn.⁶

For example, Marx convincingly explains why capital repeatedly attempts “to extend the working day to its physical maximum”, but he leaves it unclear why “the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction”.⁷ Michael A. Lebowitz has pointed out that *Capital* has nothing to say about the way in which ever-new needs are created for workers. Marx does point out, in the *Grundrisse*, that the capitalist attempts to spur the workers on “to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter etc”. He notes that “the contemporary power of capital” rests on these ever-new needs.⁸ But *Capital* is silent on the golden chains binding workers to capitalism.⁹

After all, *Capital* assumes that “in a given country at a given period, the average amount of the means of subsistence necessary for the worker is a

⁵ Lebowitz, Michael. *Beyond ‘Capital’: Marx’s Political Economy of the Working Class*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992.

⁶ Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Merlin, 1978, p.164.

⁷ Marx, Karl. ‘Value, Price and Profit’. In Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*. vol. 20. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985, p. 146.

⁸ Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. with a foreword by Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 287.

⁹ Lebowitz, Michael. *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis*. Leiden and Boston: Brill 2009, p. 308. I will also be following Lebowitz in the sections that follow.

known datum”¹⁰ and should be treated as “a constant magnitude”.¹¹ Marx had already noted in the *Grundrisse* that the general study of the changes undergone by proletarian needs belonged in the chapter on wage-labour.¹² Moreover, Marx hardly took note, analytically, of worker-organisations (trade-unions). In *Capital*, historical developments are consistently initiated by the capitalists – to the point that Marx even explains the wage-level in terms of capital’s needs. Since the worker is mortal, Marx argues, he must reproduce himself.

The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear, and by death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power. Hence the sum of means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the worker’s replacements, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its presence on the market.¹³

Just like a machine, the worker “will wear out”, which is why he needs the means “to bring up a certain quota of children”.¹⁴ Lebowitz comments on this as follows:

Frankly, to propose that the value of labour-power contains provisions for the maintenance of children because capital wants future recruits twenty years hence – rather than because workers have struggled to secure such requirements – is a teleological absurdity! However, it is a logical result of the disappearance of wage-labour-for-itself from *Capital*. Marx himself must bear responsibility for some of the functionalist absurdities of his disciples.¹⁵

These sorts of tacit assumptions are precisely what we should discuss critically.

The working class as a historical concept

The concept of the “working class” emerged towards the end of the 18th century, and was at first used especially in the plural form. The “working classes” comprised all those people employed to work for wages in manual

¹⁰ Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 275.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 655.

¹² Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Op.Cit., p. 817.

¹³ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. I. Op.Cit., p. 275.

¹⁴ Marx, Karl. *Value, Price and Profit*. Op.Cit., p. 129.

¹⁵ Lebowitz. *Following Marx*. Op.Cit., p. 311.

occupations. Probably the term came into use when, because of the rise of manufactures and factories, new groups of wage earners became visible who could be counted neither among domestic servants, nor among day-labourers or journeymen.

The precise meaning of the term “working class” is disputed. While some emphasize manual labour, broader interpretations are also advanced. Not infrequently, lower-level white-collar employees are also included in the working class, and sometimes the position is defended that *all* wage-earners belong to the working class, except for higher managers. Nevertheless, all definitions of the working class being used have three aspects in common. Firstly, they assume that members of the working class share at least one characteristic, namely that they are *dependent on a wage* for their survival, while other sources of income are either lacking or much less important. Secondly, they involve the (often implicit) assumption that workers are part of *families* who in principle also belong to the working class. Sometimes it is assumed that there is a male breadwinner who earns the income of the whole household, while other members of the family perform at most subsistence labour; sometimes the possibility is recognized that other family members can also contribute to household income. Thirdly, all definitions assume that the working class is next to, or counterposed to, *other social classes*, in particular the employers (“capitalists”), the self-employed, the unfree, and so-called “lumpenproletarians” (beggars, thieves, etc.).

All these descriptions emphasize structural, social-economic characteristics. But the working class also has a subjective side, as shown by its culture, mentality and collective action. E.P. Thompson accordingly considered “class” as an outcome of experience, emerging out of those socio-economic characteristics. “Class”, he argued, “happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.”¹⁶ The ways in which “class happens” can diverge strongly, and are unpredictable: “We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Gollancz, 1963, pp.8-9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9.

Formation

In the early 21st century, wage labour has probably become the second most prevalent form of work (after domestic subsistence-labour). But wage labour is not a phenomenon of recent vintage. Wage labour has been performed more or less sporadically for thousands of years. Originally it concerned work activities without a permanent character, such as the work of itinerant artisans, the service of military recruits or help with the harvest. The New Testament provides a good example of casual wage labour with the parable about the “householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.” (Matthew 20)

What is special about modern wage-labour is not only that it has become a socially dominant phenomenon, but also that a relatively large part of wage workers have longer-term jobs which often last for years, or sometimes even a lifetime. This historical change has occurred gradually or more rapidly from the 15th century, beginning in the North Atlantic region and then spreading to other parts of the world. Background causes of this development were, among others, the rise of capitalist production and distribution, growing state apparatuses which intervened more powerfully in economic and social life, and growing populations. These processes contributed to the emergence of regional, national and international labour markets, and new forms of social inequality.

These trends did not always lead to a growing number of wage workers (in the 17th and 18th century they were accompanied by an intensification of slavery), but in the long term they meant that more and more families depended on a wage for their survival. This “proletarianization” made a growing part of the world population dependent on one kind of income and therefore socially vulnerable.

The opportunities or risks for such workers are determined by markets and market changes. They do not possess the tools they use, the raw materials they process, or the products they produce. Their work is determined by those who possess all of this in the form of capital and who, on this basis, employ and direct them (often through managers, supervisors, or other types of middlemen). The relation between wage workers and employers is based on a contract of exchange (work for wages), terminable by both sides, and not by extra-economic compulsion or tradition.¹⁸

¹⁸ Kocka, Jürgen. Problems of Working-Class Formation: The Early Years, 1800-1875. In: Ira Katznelson and R. Zolberg, Aristide R. (eds), *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-*

Parts of the large group of wage workers so emerging develop collective identities, based on shared interests, experiences, opinions, fears and expectations. They articulate these collective identities in all kinds of ways, through sociability, religious rituals, or organizations for mutual aid. Not infrequently the new identity is also the expression of a beginning of class awareness, based on the consciousness that the interests of workers are different and often counterposed to those of the employers. Whether such consciousness emerges, and what exact forms it will have, always depends on the circumstances, and cannot be predicted in advance.

In some circumstances, class awareness becomes more militant, because groups of workers try to defend their perceived common interests against the state or the employers through economic or political action. In support of this struggle for their interests, they can form diverse kinds of organizations, such as trade unions, political parties or sometimes even paramilitary units. Here again it is true that this can happen in all kinds of different ways, and that the content of a conflict of interest can show great variations. Only rarely do such interest groups strive to unite all workers; more often they exclude segments of the class because of reasons of gender, ethnicity, nationality, education, etc.

“Peripheral” working classes

In recent decades, more and more voices argue that the interpretation of the working class given above is too restrictive. The distinctions between “classical” wage-earners and some other subordinate groups are very fine indeed. Thirdly, there are all kinds of forms of “hidden” wage labour, such as sharecropping where a peasant family supplies labour and the landowner the land and means of production, while the revenues are shared between them according to some formula; or self-employed workers, who are formally employers without staff, but in reality are often dependent on one specific client who is therefore their *de facto* employer. This relativization of the boundaries of the working class has recently motivated historians to redefine the working class, such that slaves and other unfree workers can also be included, just like ostensibly “independent” self-employed operators.¹⁹ The historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, for example, revealed how in the early-modern North Atlantic region a multiform proletariat of “hewers

Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 282.

¹⁹ van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008.

of wood and drawers of water” developed, with various sites of struggle: “the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory”.²⁰ They made it seem likely that slaves and maroons from Africa, indentured labourers from Europe, native Americans, and “free” wage earners and artisans constituted a complex but also socially and culturally interconnected amorphous “multitude”, which was also regarded as one whole (a “many-headed Hydra”) by those in power. Linebaugh and Rediker referred to the 1791 rebellion of Haitian slaves as “the first successful workers' revolt in modern history”. They suggested that this revolution contributed to the segmentation of that rebellious “multitude” afterwards: “What was left behind was national and partial: the English working class, the black Haitian, the Irish diaspora”. The narrow nineteenth-century concept of the proletariat we find in Marx and others was, they suggest, a result of this segmentation.

We have to rethink the traditional notion of the working class. On the one hand, the experience of the *contemporary* global South tells us, that the distinctions between “classical” wage-earners and some other subordinate groups are vague indeed. “Pure” wage workers have been a minority in the labour force of many countries in the Global South; there, a process of class formation often did not develop until the very end. Most of these wage-earners do not freely dispose of their own labour power—for example, because these workers are tied down by debts—or they do not have any formal (legally recognized) contractual relationship with their employers. In addition, wage labour in the South is carried out by households and families whose survival very often remains partly dependent on subsistence labour as well—performed especially, but not exclusively, by women—and on independent production of commodities for the market, etc. The economic roles that different family members take on are often not fixed and permanent, but instead signify a transient social relationship, one that can be replaced rather quickly by other sources of income. That is one reason why the dividing line between workers and so-called *lumpenproletarians* (people who survive by means of begging, crime, prostitution, and so on) is not always easy to draw. Referring to Africa, Vic Allen concluded some forty years ago that “In societies in which bare subsistence is the norm for a high proportion of all the working class, and where men, women, and children are compelled to seek alternative means of subsistence, as distinct from their traditional ones, the *lumpenproletariat* is barely distinguishable from much of the rest of the

²⁰ Linebaugh, Peter and Rediker, Marcus. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

working class”.²¹ Next to that, there are all kinds of forms of hidden wage labour, such as sharecropping, in which a peasant family supplies labour, and the landowner supplies the land and means of production, while the revenues are shared between them according to some formula. Another form of “hidden” wage labour includes *self-employed workers*, who are formally employers without staff, but in reality often dependent on one specific client who is therefore their *de facto* employer.

On the other hand, *historical* studies reveal that in the past, the dividing line between chattel slaves, serfs, and other unfree subalterns taken together and “free” wage-earners was rather vague at best. On the African East Coast around 1900, for example, there lived quite a number of slaves who:

worked as self-employed artisans or skilled workers, some of whom had previously worked as day labourers but had learnt a more lucrative trade. ... These self-employed slaves ... were respected for their knowledge and thus commanded exceedingly high prices in the market, but they were rarely for sale. With almost the same status as freed slaves, a number of them actually owned small garden plots, and occasionally even slaves.’²²

Brazilian historians especially have pointed to the fluid dividing line between “free” wage labour and chattel slavery, for example in the case of the *ganhadores* (slaves-for-hire) who earned their own wage, part of which they had to hand over to their owners.²³ In South Asia other ambivalences occur, for example in the case of indentured labourers (*coolies*) who were employed in South Asia itself, but also in the Caribbean, Malaya, Natal, Fiji and elsewhere. Their situation is sometimes described as a “new form of slavery”, but at other times as “nearly free” wage labour.²⁴ In Australia, after lengthy hesitations, labour historians have no difficulty anymore to describe the numerous convict labourers originally settling in the country as “working class” in the broad sense of the word, even though these workers performed

²¹ Allen, V.L. The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10, 2 (1972), p. 188.

²² Deutsch, Jan-Georg. *Emancipation without Abolition in German East Africa c.1884-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 71-72.

²³ Groundbreaking was the article by Lara, Silvia Hunold. Escravidão, cidadania e história do trabalho no Brasil. *Projeto História*, No. 16, February 1998, pp. 25-38. See also the important case study by Reis, João José. “The Revolution of the Ganhadores”: Urban Labour, Ethnicity and the African Strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29, 1997, pp. 355-393.

²⁴ Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of India Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

forced labour.²⁵ And for Europe, the new research reveals that many so-called “free” workers were really *bonded* labourers, far into the 19th century. Master-and-servant laws, apprenticeship arrangements, etc., ensured that workers were tied to their employers, and had significantly fewer legal rights than the literature previously suggested. In this context, there has indeed been mention of “industrial serfdom”.²⁶

Critiquing the classics (I): wage labour versus slavery

These trends make it necessary to rethink the connection between wage labour and capitalism. Classical thinkers like Max Weber and Karl Marx believed that capitalism and wage labour were two sides of the same coin. *Marx* reduced the working class to workers who as free individuals can dispose of their labour-power as their own commodity, while they have no other commodity for sale.²⁷ Capitalism is the mode of production based on such workers. Other labour relations may also occur under capitalism, but they form an “anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself”, which is “possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production”, though “only because it does not exist at other points”.²⁸ Other social groups like independent artisans and peasants have no real future and will “decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry”.²⁹ *Weber* considered the “formally purely voluntarist organization of labour” as the “typical and dominant form for the satisfaction of the needs of the masses, with expropriation of the workers’ means of production”.³⁰

Marx’s distinction between chattel slave and “free” wage earner was not correct. Marx engaged with issues related to slave labour in many passages of his work. He was more aware of the contrast between “free” wage

²⁵ An excellent overview is provided by Roberts, David Andrew. The ‘Knotted Hands that Set Us High’: Labour History and the Study of Convict Australia. *Labour History* [Sydney], No. 100, May 2011, pp. 33-50.

²⁶ See e.g. McKinlay, Alan. From Industrial Serf to Wage-Labourer: The 1937 Apprentice Revolt in Britain. *International Review of Social History*. Vol. 31, 1, April 1986, pp.1-18. Comparative perspectives are offered in Steinfeld, Robert J. *The Invention of Free Labor. The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350-1870*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991; Hay, Douglas and Craven, Paul (eds.). *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004 and in Stanziani, Alessandro Stanziani (ed.). *Le travail contraint en Asie et en Europe: XVII-XXe siècles*. Paris: CNRS, 2010.

²⁷ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. I. Op.Cit., p. 272.

²⁸ Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Op.Cit., p. 464.

²⁹ Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. The Communist Manifesto. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Collected Works*, vol. 6. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, p. 494.

³⁰ Weber, Max. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1921, p. 96.

labour and slavery than most 21st century scholars. As an expert on European antiquity (on which he wrote his PhD thesis) and as a contemporary to the American Civil War, Marx was very much aware of the slavery problem.³¹ The first volume of *Capital* was published two years after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865 and 21 years before it was officially proclaimed in Brazil. Marx considered slavery a historically backward mode of exploitation that would soon be a thing of the past, as “free” wage labour embodied the capitalist future. He compared the two labour forms in several writings. He certainly saw similarities between them – both produced a surplus product and “the wage-labourer, just like the slave, must have a master to make him work and govern him”.³² At the same time, he distinguished some differences that overshadowed all the common experiences they shared. Let me offer some brief critical comments on them and indicate some doubts.

First: wage workers dispose of labour capacity, viz. “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind”³³ – and this labour capacity is the source of value; the capitalist purchases this labour capacity as a commodity, because he expects it to provide him with a “specific service”, namely the creation of “more value than it has itself”.³⁴ The same is not true of the slave’s labour capacity. The slaveholder “has paid cash for his slaves”, and so “the product of their labour represents the interest on the capital invested in their purchase”.³⁵ But since interest is nothing but a form of surplus value, according to Marx,³⁶ it would seem that slaves would have to produce surplus value. And it is a fact that the sugar plantations on which slave labour was employed yielded considerable profits, because the commodity sugar embodied more value than the capital invested by the plantation owner (ground rent, amortisation of the slaves, amortisation of the sugar cane press, etc.). So is it really the case that only the wage worker produces the equivalent

³¹Backhaus, Wilhelm. *Marx, Engels und die Sklaverei. Zur ökonomischen Problematik der Unfreiheit*. Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1974 ; de Sainte Croix, Geoffroy E.M. Karl Marx and the History of Classical Antiquity. *Arethusa*, 8, 1975, pp. 7-41; Lekas, Padelis. *Marx on Classical Antiquity. Problems of Historical Methodology*. (Sussex: Wheatsheaf, 1988); Reichardt, Tobias. Marx über die Gesellschaft der klassischen Antike. *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung*. New Series, 2004, pp. 194-222.

³²Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. III. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p. 510.

³³Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit. p. 270.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 301.

³⁵Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 762.

³⁶“Rent, interest, and industrial profit are only different names for different parts of the surplus value of the commodity, or the unpaid labour enclosed in it, and they are equally derived from this source and from this source alone.” Marx, Karl. Value, Price and Profit. Op.Cit., p. 133.

of his/her own value plus “an excess, a surplus-value”?³⁷ Or is the slave a “source of value” as well?

Second: Marx states that labour power can

appear on the market as a commodity only if, and in so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale or sells it as a commodity. In order that its possessor may sell it as a commodity, he must have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity, hence of his person.³⁸

The future wage worker and the money owner “meet in the market, and enter into relations with each other on a footing of equality as owners of commodities, with the sole difference that one is a buyer, the other a seller; both are therefore equal in the eyes of the law”.³⁹ In other words: labour power should be offered for sale by the person who is the carrier and possessor of this labour power and the person who sells the labour power offers it exclusively. Why should that be so? Why can the labour power not be sold by someone other than the carrier, as for example in the case of children who are made to perform wage labour in a factory by their parents? Why can the person who offers (his or her own, or someone else’s) labour power for sale not sell it conditionally, together with means of production? And why can someone who does not own his own labour power nevertheless sell this labour power, as in the case of rented slaves, whose owners provide them to someone else for a fee?⁴⁰

Third: the wage worker embodies variable capital.

It both reproduces the equivalent of its own value and produces an excess, a surplus value, which may itself vary, and be more or less according to circumstances. This part of capital is continually being transformed from a constant into a variable magnitude. I therefore call it the variable part of capital, or more briefly, variable capital.⁴¹

It is only because labour is presupposed in the form of wage-labour, and the means of production in the form of capital (i.e.

³⁷ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁴⁰ Marx was quite aware of this practice of renting slaves, but he drew no theoretical conclusions from it. See for example: Marx, *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 597: “Under the slave system the worker does have a capital value, namely his purchase price. And if he is hired out, the hirer must first pay the interest on this purchase price and on top of this replace the capital’s annual depreciation”.

⁴¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

only as a result of this specific form of these two essential agents of production), that one part of the value (product) presents itself as surplus-value and this surplus-value presents itself as profit (rent), the gains of the capitalist, as additional available wealth belonging to him.⁴²

To Marx, the slave is part of fixed capital and no different, economically, from livestock or machinery. “The slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse”.⁴³ The slave’s capital value is his purchasing price, and this capital value has to be amortised over time, just as with livestock and machinery.⁴⁴ But how justified is Marx in defining only wage labour as variable capital, on the grounds that “this part of capital” can “be more or less”?⁴⁵ Is the same not true of commodity-producing slave labour?

Fourth: when the wage worker produces a commodity, this commodity is “a unity formed of use-value and value”, for which reason “the process of production must be a unity, composed of the labour process and the process of creating value [*Wertbildungsprozess*]”.⁴⁶ No one will doubt that slaves producing cane sugar, tobacco or indigo are producing commodities, just like wage workers. But if this is the case, then slaves also produce value. Marx denies this, since he considers slaves part of constant capital and holds that only variable capital creates value.

Fifth: the wage worker always divests himself of his labour power “for a limited period only, for if he were to sell it in a lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity”.⁴⁷ Normally, one would refer to such a transaction (the “sale” of a commodity in instalments, without any change of owner) as a lease and not as a sale – an obvious idea that was already formulated much earlier.⁴⁸ The distinction between a lease and a sale

⁴² Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 1021. This is why surplus labour appears in two very different forms in these two cases. In the case of wage labour, the wage form eradicates “every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour”. Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 680. By contrast, in the case of slave labour, ‘even the part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of subsistence, in which he therefore actually works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All his labour appears as unpaid labour.’ Ibid., p. 680.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 377; the *Grundrisse* contains a similar passage. Op.Cit., pp. 489–490.

⁴⁴ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 597.

⁴⁵ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 317.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 293.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

⁴⁸ Marx himself referred repeatedly to the analogy between rent and wage labour. He did so most extensively in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, where he writes that the worker is paid

may appear insignificant, but it is not. As Franz Oppenheimer has rightly noted:

When a sales contract is closed, the substance of the commodity becomes the property of the other party, whereas when a lease contract is closed, the other party merely purchases the right to use the commodity; the seller only makes his commodity available temporarily, without relinquishing ownership of it.⁴⁹

When A sells B a commodity, B becomes the owner in lieu of A. But when A leases B a commodity, A remains the owner and B merely receives the right to use the commodity for a fixed term. The “substance” of the commodity remains with A, whereas B receives its “use and enjoyment”.⁵⁰ Thus, if wage labour is the leasing of labour power, the difference between a wage worker and a slave does not consist in the “definite period of time”⁵¹ for which labour power is made available, but in the fact that in one case, labour power is leased, while in the other it is sold. Why do we not find this consideration in Marx? Presumably because it makes the process of value creation appear in a different light. The substance of the value of labour power is retained by the worker rather than being yielded to the capitalist. Engels held that lease transactions are “only a transfer of already *existing*, previously *produced* value, and the total sum of values possessed by the landlord and the tenant *together* remains the same after as it was before”.⁵² Thus if wage labour were a lease relation as well, it could not create surplus value.

Sixth: according to Marx, the rate of profit tends to decline because the social productivity of labour increases constantly:

for his commodity (his labour capacity) only after he has finished working: “It can also be seen that here it is the worker, not the capitalist, who does the advancing, just as in the case of the renting of a house, it is not the tenant but the landlord who advances use-value”. Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 32. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989, p. 302; see also Marx, *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 279: “The price of the labour-power is fixed by the contract, although it is not realized till later, like the rent of a house”. On this, see also Kuczynski, Thomas. Was wird auf dem Arbeitsmarkt verkauft? In: van der Linden, Marcel and Heinz Roth, K. *Über Marx hinaus*. Op.Cit.

⁴⁹ Oppenheimer, Franz. *Die soziale Frage und der Sozialismus. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Theorie*. Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1912, p.120.

⁵⁰ Differently from what Oppenheimer believed – “[...] only the labour capacity that is intended for sale (e.g. that of the work ox, the slave) is a commodity, not that intended merely for lease” (Ibid., p. 121) –, a lease contract also operates according to the logic of the commodity; this is precisely why the leasing fee depends on the value of the leased commodity.

⁵¹ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, I. Op.Cit., p. 271.

⁵² Engels, Friedrich. The Housing Question. In: Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 23. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988, p. 320.

Since the mass of living labour applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labour that sets it in motion, i.e. the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labour that is unpaid and objectified in surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied.⁵³

The endpoint of this tendency would of course be a situation in which variable capital has been reduced to zero and total capital consists exclusively of constant capital. In such a situation, the collapse of capitalism would be a fact. But the odd thing is that there already existed such a terminal phase prior to the industrial revolution, namely on the plantations of the 17th and 18th centuries. These plantations employed slave labour, so that according to Marx's premises, total capital consisted exclusively of constant capital. How are we to account for the economic dynamism of the plantations on this basis?

The example of slave labour shows Marx did not provide a consistent justification for the privileged position productive wage labour is given within his theory of value. There is much to suggest that slaves and wage workers are structurally more similar than Marx and traditional Marxism suspected. The historical reality of capitalism has featured many hybrid and transitional forms between slavery and "free" wage labour. Moreover, slaves and wage workers have repeatedly performed the same work in the same business enterprise.⁵⁴ It is true, of course, that the slave's labour capacity is the permanent property of the capitalist, whereas the wage worker only makes his labour capacity available to the capitalist for a limited time, even if he does so repeatedly. It remains unclear, however, why slaves should create no surplus value while wage workers do. The time has come to expand the theory of value in such a way as to recognise the productive labour of slaves and other unfree workers as an essential component of the capitalist economy.

Critiquing the classics (II): the so-called lumpenproletariat

As a contemporary concept the *lumpenproletariat* makes its first appearance during the years 1848-51, when Marx analyses French revolutionary and counterrevolutionary trends. Marx was struck by the

⁵³ Marx, Karl. *Capital*, III. Op.Cit., p. 319.

⁵⁴ E.g. on the coffee plantations around São Paulo, or in a chemical factory in Baltimore. Hall, Michael and Stolcke, Verena. The Introduction of Free Labour on São Paulo Coffee Plantations. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 10, 2/3, 1983, pp. 170-200; Whitman, T. Stephen. Industrial Slavery at the Margin: The Maryland Chemical Works. *Journal of Southern History*, 59, 1, 1993, pp. 31-62.

observation that workers had acted on both sides of the barricades – an apparent absurdity that he could only explain by valuing those on the good side as “real” proletarians, and devaluing those on the wrong side as pseudo-proletarians.⁵⁵

When, in 1851, the workers were again divided and a part of them supported Louis Bonaparte, Marx saw his analysis confirmed. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52) he includes in the *lumpenproletariat* not only “decayed *roués*” of aristocratic descent and “ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie”, but also

vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, rogues, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, *litterati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*.⁵⁶

This characterization suggests some analytical and empirical questions. Which groups could Marx have meant specifically? Apparently, he is lumping together a range of social groups:

(i) displaced peasants. The *Manifesto* speaks about the “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society”. Probably, this is a reference to those former peasants, who through enclosures or other measures were robbed of their means of existence, migrated to the cities and became the unskilled part of the modern proletariat.

(ii) displaced proletarians, that is urban workers without means of existence – people who have lost their jobs, or are too old or too sick to find employment.

(iii) Self-employed, such as the “porters, *litterati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers”.

⁵⁵ This led to a certain ambivalence: the “wrong” workers *were* and *were not* proletarians. Hal Draper points this out and observes “a certain ambivalence on the question whether the lumpenproletariat is to be regarded as a part of the proletariat or not”. Draper, Hal. The Concept of the “Lumpenproletariat” in Marx and Engels. *Etudes de Marxologie*, 15, 1972, p. 2294. In *The Class Struggles in France* (1850) one can for instance read, that the counterrevolutionary Mobile Guards “belonged for the most part to the *lumpenproletariat*, which in all big towns forms a mass sharply differentiated from the industrial proletariat [...]”. Just a few lines later, Marx writes, however, that “the Paris proletariat was confronted with an army, drawn from its own midst”. Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 62.

⁵⁶ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In: Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Collected Works*, vol. 11. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979, p. 149.

(iv) Dubious professions, including the mountebanks, tricksters, gamblers, brothel keepers and prostitutes. What unites them is not a specific type of labour relation, but the seemingly immoral nature of their work. “What is going on here seems to be that Marx is including an assortment of occupations which command widespread dislike to make the lumpenproletariat seem less reputable rather than engaging in any kind of serious social (or socialist) analysis”.⁵⁷

Apart from these logical considerations, there are also empirical problems with Marx’s analysis. The historical sociologist Mark Traugott has made a careful and detailed study of six battalions (comprising 3,845 individuals) of the “wrong” Mobile Guard in 1848. He concludes, that the social composition of the workers on the false side of the barricades does not confirm the *lumpenproletarian* hypothesis:

First, if self-reported occupations tell us anything at all, the Mobile Guard consisted in the main of workers in artisanal trades requiring relatively high levels of skill and training. This is not to deny the presence of a scattering of occupations that fit descriptions of the lumpenproletariat. If, unsurprisingly, no Mobile Guardsman listed his previous occupation as pimp, beggar, or thief, one does find listed a handful of itinerant peddlers, a single ragpicker, several street musicians, a magician, a mountebank, and a number for whom ‘no profession’ is specified. But even if one were to adopt a broad definition of *lumpenproletarian* status that included tinkers, scrap-metal dealers, market porters, and literati of all kinds, one could come up with only eighty-three such individuals or 3.0 percent of the total sample.⁵⁸

Marx’s concrete analysis of the French situation was thus misleading. Besides, the social groups considered by Marx as lumpenproletarians have certainly not always been reactionaries. Victor Kiernan has, for instance, argued that the London lumpenproletariat after periods of seeming resignation could break out like a cyclone; and once in movement, its actions were characterized by “above all, audacity, spontaneity, disregard of the arbitrary chalk-lines within which society coops up its fowl; a cheerful conviction that the law is an ass”. Usually, such waves of militancy followed in the wake of protests by “ordinary” workers: “It was when those who

⁵⁷ Cowling, Mark. Marx’s Lumpenproletariat and Murray’s Underclass: Concepts Best Abandoned?. In: Cowling, Mark Cowling and Martin, James (eds.). *Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)Modern Interpretations*. London: Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 228-242, at 232.

⁵⁸ Traugott, Mark. *Armies of the Poor. Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 76-77.

normally had jobs suffered acute spells of unemployment, and showed signs of mutinying, that the stragglers joined in, and might go further”.⁵⁹ Moreover in general, *lumpenproletarians* have often been a driving force in social struggles.⁶⁰ Naturally, this does not make them a new vanguard, as has sometimes been suggested (e.g. by Frantz Fanon). It underlines, however, that the *lumpenproletariat* is not so much an analytical, as a moral category.

The concept’s untenability becomes particularly clear in the Global South. Fuzzy concepts like “the informal sector” are an expression of such social conditions under which semi-proletarian households combine numerous activities to ensure their survival.⁶¹

A new concept

The implications are far-reaching. Apparently, there is a large class of people within capitalism, whose labour power is commodified in various ways. I would like to call this class the *extended or subaltern working class*. Its members make up a very varied group: it includes chattel slaves, sharecroppers, small artisans and wage earners. It is the historic dynamics of this “multitude” that we should try to understand. We have to consider that in capitalism there *always* existed, and probably will continue to exist, several forms of commodified labour subsisting side by side.

In its long development, capitalism has utilized many kinds of work relationships, some mainly based on economic compulsion, others with a strong non-economic component. Millions of slaves were brought by force from Africa to the Caribbean, to Brazil and in the southern states of the USA. Contract workers from India and China were shipped off to toil in South Africa, Malaysia or South America. “Free” migrant workers left Europe for the New World, for Australia or the colonies. And today sharecroppers produce an important portion of world agricultural output. These and other work-relationships are synchronous, even if there seems to be a secular trend towards “free wage labour”. Slavery still exists and sharecropping is enjoying a comeback in some regions. Capitalism could and can choose whatever form of commodified labour it thinks fits in a given historical context: one variant

⁵⁹ Kiernan, Victor. Victorian London – Unending Purgatory. *New Left Review*, 76, 1972, pp. 73-90, at 82.

⁶⁰ Bovenkerk, Frank. The Rehabilitation of the Rabble: How and Why Marx and Engels Wrongly Depicted the Lumpenproletariat as a Reactionary Force. *The Netherlands Journal of Sociology*, 20, 1, 1984, pp. 13-41.

⁶¹ See e.g. Breman, Jan. *Wage Hunters and Gatherers. Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of South Gujarat*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 3-130.

seems most profitable today, another tomorrow. If this argument is correct, then it behooves us to conceptualize the wage-earning class as one (important) kind of commodified labour among others. Consequently, so-called “free” labour cannot be seen as the only form of exploitation suitable for modern capitalism but as one alternative among several.

A possible new definition of the working class could be: *the ensemble of carriers of labour power whose labour power is sold or hired out to another person under economic or non-economic compulsions, regardless of whether the carrier of labour power is him- or herself selling or hiring it out and, regardless of whether the carrier him- or herself owns means of production.* All aspects of this provisional definition will require further reflection.

Such a reconceptualization and broadening of the notion of the working class will help us to better understand the many forms of resistance that have been used by subaltern workers over time. The classical approach suggests, for example, that strikes are a form of collective action that is associated especially with free wage labourers. But if we look at the ways in which protest is expressed and pressure is exerted by the different groups of subaltern workers (including slaves, the self-employed, the *lumpenproletarians* and the “free” wage labourers), these appear to overlap considerably. In the past, all kinds of subaltern workers went on strike. The sharecropping silver miners in Chihuahua protested as early as the 1730s against the termination of their work contracts by the owners of the mine. They entrenched themselves in the nearby hills.

There they built a makeshift stone parapet, unfurled a banner proclaiming their defiance, and vowed to storm the villa of San Felipe, kill [the mine owner] San Juan y Santa Cruz, and burn his house to the ground. For the next several weeks they refused to budge from their mountain redoubt, where they passed time by composing and singing songs of protest.

The miners returned only after mediation by a priest sent by the bishop.⁶²

Slaves regularly went on strike too. Serfs in Russia refused “to recognize their owner’s authority over them”; they stopped working for him

⁶² Martin, English. *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico. Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 51.

and decided “to go on strike”.⁶³ On plantations in the British Caribbean in the early nineteenth century there were walkouts by slaves:

The rebellions in Demerara in 1829 and Jamaica in 1831 both began as versions of the modern work strike, coupled with other acts of defiance, but not with killing. Only when the local militia retaliated with force, assuming that this was another armed uprising, did such an occurrence actually take place”.⁶⁴

A broadened concept of the working class will enable us to rethink the strike phenomenon. By including slaves and indentured labourers, it becomes possible to see that the strike is a very important, but also a specific form of the collective refusal to work. So-called unfree workers have used other forms of collective refusal that deserve to be integrated in our analysis. We all know of the maroons, the slaves who fled the plantations in North America as well as the Caribbean and South America. But this kind of resistance is not confined to the New World. Already in the ninth century the *Zanj*, slaves of East-African origin working in the salt marshes of South Iraq, left their masters as a group and constructed the city of Al Mukhtara, in a spot chosen for its inaccessibility. And at the mainland coast of Tanganyika in 1873, plantation slaves fled in huge numbers and founded the village of Makorora, “hidden in a thicket of thorny bushes” and with “heavy fortifications”.⁶⁵

In 1921 coolies on tea plantations in the Chargola Valley in Assam protested when the authorities refused a wage increase. They deserted the plantations en masse:

They resolved to go back to their home districts, chanting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to have served under his orders. Soon, the entire Chargola valley looked deserted, with two gardens reported to have ‘lost’ virtually their entire labour force, and on an average, most gardens had suffered losses of around thirty to sixty percent. The coolies of Chargola Valley marched right through Karimganj, the subdivisional headquarters, continuing their onward journey either by train or on foot, and

⁶³ Kolchin, Peter. *Unfree Labor. American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987, p. 258.

⁶⁴ Craton, Michael. *Testing the Chains. Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 301; Schuler, Monica. Ethnic Slave Rebellions in the Caribbean and the Guianas. *Journal of Social History*, 3, 1970, pp. 382-383.

⁶⁵ Glassman, Jonathan. The Bondsman’s New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast. *Journal of African History*, 32, 2, 1991, p.308.

also by steamer they made their way back to their home districts.⁶⁶

Seen against this background, the strikes of so-called free wage-earners constitute just *one* form of collective resistance against the exploitation of commodified labour. And we should also acknowledge that conversely free wage labourers have often used methods of struggle which are usually associated with other groups of subaltern workers, such as lynching, rioting, arson, and bombing.

By broadening our view on commodified labour under capitalism, we will be better placed to write the history of all those anonymous individuals and families who, as the playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, wrote, “built Thebes of the seven gates”, and so often “cooked the feast for the victors”

⁶⁶ Varma, Nitin. *Chargola Exodus and Collective Action in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam*. *SEPHIS e-magazine* [http://sephisemagazine.org/issues/vol._3_2.pdf], 2, January 2007, p. 34.

